SCORE State Collaborative on Reforming Education

The Future of Teacher Evaluation

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Tennessee's current teacher evaluation system was implemented in 2011 to provide teachers with clear feedback about their instruction to better support the learning of all students in their classrooms. Regular evaluation feedback creates an opportunity for teachers to reflect on their performance and enables school leaders to provide targeted professional development to advance student outcomes. **At its core, evaluation is the mechanism that makes data-informed coaching, development, and improvement possible, serving as a tool to strengthen the teaching workforce when implemented well.** Research has found that, more than any other in-school factor, teachers matter most to accelerating student achievement, so it is imperative that all teachers have ample access to information and resources to enhance their practice.[1]

Tennessee has been nationally recognized for its multiple-measure teacher evaluation system and is one of two state exemplars where evaluation reform resulted in sustained positive effects on student achievement in math and English language arts.[2] The Tennessee Education Research Alliance (TERA) at Vanderbilt University also found that after 10 years of implementation, **student performance increased at a much faster rate, attributing improvement in both student achievement and teacher growth to teacher evaluation reform.**[3] Further, the Tennessee Educator Survey shows that **most teachers believe evaluations improve student achievement and their instructional practices.** [4] The consistent evidence of the positive impact of teacher evaluation both on student outcomes and teaching practice showcases its longstanding value.

OPPORTUNITIES TO ADVANCE TEACHER EVALUATION

Even with success, there are opportunities to continue to advance Tennessee's evaluation system so it drives meaningful discussion and professional development between teachers and school leaders, leading to instructional improvement.

OPPORTUNITY #1: IMPROVE THE DISTRIBUTION OF TEACHER EFFECTIVENESS RATINGS.

For teacher evaluation to continue advancing its original goal of improving student achievement, the system must meaningfully differentiate teacher effectiveness, so school leaders have clear information to make decisions related to professional development, targeted support, tenure, assignment, and leadership opportunities.[5] Despite the positive impact of teacher evaluation on performance, there exists an accuracy gap where overall effectiveness scores are inflated. **Tennessee rates nearly all licensed teachers as effective and most as highly effective. This is misaligned with student performance**, as only 42% of students are proficient in math and 39% in English language arts.

While the distribution of teacher effectiveness, based on multiple measures, should not perfectly mirror student proficiency rates, inflated effectiveness ratings do not enable school leaders to make data-informed decisions for support and development.

One contributing factor to the inflated distribution ratings is that **teachers can select from an extensive list of achievement measures that may be misaligned to their individual impact as a teacher.** Every teacher chooses what metric will be used for the achievement portion of their overall evaluation score. Most teachers have five categories of student achievement options to choose from (e.g., state assessments at the classroom, grade, or school-levels, TVAAS composites for school-level, or off-the-shelf assessments), and high school teachers have three additional options (e.g., graduation rate, ACT, or EPSO exams).

Another flexibility in the calculation of an overall evaluation score is that, for teachers meeting or exceeding student growth expectations, the growth measure may replace the achievement measure and even the classroom observation measure in the final calculation. Growth is important because it captures the work that teachers are doing to improve student performance. However, this flexibility means that a teacher's growth score could account for 60% to 100% of the final evaluation score.

Observation protocols and rubrics also vary depending on the district or charter school where districts and public charter schools may select from the state's Tennessee Educator Acceleration Model (TEAM) or from an approved list of alternate observation models.[6] This high degree of local flexibility and teacher choice within the evaluation calculation means that teachers across Tennessee are not only experiencing a multiple-measure design but are subject to a widely varying system design for determining teacher effectiveness.

Recommendations for Opportunity #1

- The State Board of Education should narrow the student achievement and growth measure selection menus so that individual teacher impact is captured. Require that classroom-level student achievement counts toward overall evaluation scores for teachers teaching tested subjects and condense achievement options for teachers teaching nontested subjects.
- The Department of Education should build out the TEAM observation rubric indicators for levels two and four to provide evaluators with greater clarity about performance-level expectations.

OPPORTUNITY #2: PROMOTE A CULTURE OF FEEDBACK AND COACHING THROUGH STRATEGIC STAFFING.

In the 2024 Tennessee Educator Survey, two-thirds of principals reported spending less than 10% of their time on teacher evaluations and spending progressively less time since 2020.[7] Time spent supporting teachers through evaluation, however, can vary across districts and schools, depending on the number of instructional supervisors, the licensure levels of teachers, and teacher effectiveness. The state observation protocol only requires one formal evaluation annually for highly effective teachers. Based on current rates of effectiveness, this means that school leaders are only required to observe most teachers' classroom once a year. This flexible expectation accounts for concerns about administrative burden, while still maintaining a baseline for professional feedback and coaching on instructional practice for every teacher every year. **All teachers deserve high-quality observations, feedback cycles, and support to improve their professional practice.**

Recommendations for Opportunity #2

- The General Assembly should establish a district grant to pilot an innovative approach to teacher staffing and professional development that empowers teacher-leaders to provide instructional coaching to their content-area peers; invests in merit-pay structures to reward highly effective teachers; and allows for observation flexibilities, such as utilizing the instructional practice guide for content-area feedback.

OPPORTUNITY #3: MONITOR THE FIDELITY AND IMPLEMENTATION OF TEACHER EVALUATION.

Public reporting of teacher evaluation and effectiveness data was last released by the Tennessee Department of Education in 2015. This information would equip school and district leaders, as well as policymakers and advocates, with insights to monitor the implementation of teacher evaluation over time. The leaders would also be better able to determine whether the time and energy spent toward teacher evaluation is having the intended effect of ensuring all teachers have high-quality feedback and is driving improved student outcomes.

Recommendations for Opportunity #3

- The Department of Education should publish an annual report on the Tennessee educator labor market that includes data and analysis of teacher evaluation, teacher effectiveness, and other key trends so state leaders can better understand the health of the profession and pipeline. For transparency, composite teacher Level of Overall Effectiveness (LOE) scores should also be added to the state report card for districts and the state overall.
- In addition to a public statewide report, the Department of Education should report school- and district-level data and analyses related to local educator labor markets directly to principals and superintendents to help them measure and manage their teacher workforce.
- The Department of Education should return evaluation component and LOE scores promptly to teachers and school leaders for coaching, so that teacher evaluation data and student performance data can be reviewed simultaneously and be more actionable.

References

[1] Opper, Isaac M. Teachers Matter: Understanding Teachers' Impact on Student Achievement. RAND Corporation. (2019).

[2] Bleiberg, Joshua, Eric Brunner, Erica Harbatkin, Matthew A. Kraft and Matthew Springer. "Taking Teacher Evaluation to Scale: The Effect of State Reforms on Achievement and Attainment." Annenberg Institute at Brown University. (February 2024).

[3] Guthrie, J. Edward, Mónica Hernández and Jason A. Grissom. Teacher Evaluation in Tennessee: What We Have Learned from a Decade of Research. Tennessee Education Research Alliance. (July 2021)

[4] Tennessee Educator Survey. Tennessee Department of Education. (2019-2024).

[5] Teacher Evaluation in Tennessee: A Report on Year 1 Implementation. Tennessee Department of Education First to the Top. (July 2012).

[6] Tennessee State Board of Education Policy 5.201.

[7] 2024 Tennessee Educator Survey. Tennessee Department of Education.